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## Wondrous Times on the Frontier

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inexactitude about dates in particular. Often the reader is uncertain when events occur. At least some of the difficulty stems directly from Frémont himself. He kept most of his thoughts bottled up, and even a biographer as successful as Rolle has some difficulty in bringing this person to life on the pages of a biography.

*Wondrous Times on the Frontier*, by Dee Brown. Little Rock: August House, 1991. ix, 324 pp. Notes, index. \$23.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY PAULA M. NELSON, UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-PLATTEVILLE

*Wondrous Times on the Frontier* is the latest in a long string of books on the West by Dee Brown. Brown is perhaps best known as the author of *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West*, a book that helped awaken interest in the history and contemporary plight of Indian peoples, but he has also written fourteen other works of nonfiction as well as ten novels. In the course of his productive career, Brown has had the opportunity to collect hundreds of jokes, tall tales, anecdotes, and lively quotations from the motley crew that made up frontier western society. Here he organizes those quotes and stories into a loose narrative. His purpose: to help past frontier peoples to "tell why they were there, what they believed in, how they endured and how they used humor—both light and dark—to contend with the burdens of their world" (16).

*Wondrous Times* is arranged topically. The first section deals with travel and tourists, dancing, gambling, climate and other natural phenomena, and the dark side of humor. The second section discusses the various professions on the frontier and their contributions to humor and tall tales. Brown features lawyers, editors, teachers, preachers, and other such personalities. Finally, a third section surveys the humor of and about "misunderstood minorities"—women and Indian peoples. Within each section Brown ranges widely in time and place. The stories date from the 1840s to the end of the nineteenth century; the locales include most of the trans-Mississippi West.

Unfortunately, *Wondrous Times on the Frontier* is disappointing. Although Brown states a clear goal for the book (as quoted earlier), he never reaches it. The narrative is flimsy, apparently tacked together to house a host of barely related events or anecdotes. The tone of many of the stories is decidedly unfunny and even depressing. For example, in his chapter on the medical profession in the West, Brown states that doctors had to equip their offices with curiosities, such as pickled organs removed from earlier patients, to impress their current patients with the mysteries of medicine and with their own professional capa-

bilities. He establishes that fact of medical life with one example drawn from a California mining town. Then Brown tells one story from Colorado to support his contention. In the Colorado case, the doctor delivered a stillborn baby, the child of a local prostitute. He wrapped it in newspaper to carry it to his office where he planned to preserve it in a jar for display. "Proud of his acquisition, he invited a few of his cronies to see it before bottling. . . . 'Whose is it?' asked one of the men." The newspaper had imprinted its ink on the dead baby's stomach; two tobacco merchants' ads appeared on the body. "'No doubt about it,' replied the doctor, 'it bears their brand'" (186). Brown then changes the subject to explain one example of crude medical offices. The context of the initial subject is lost in the shuffle; the "humor" comes across as cruel and unfeeling rather than illuminating.

The book offers little insight into the true nature of frontier society—its wit, poignancy, and troubles. There *are* great stories about frontier life available; many westerners had an amazing facility with words, yet few of the stories in *Wondrous Times* show that talent. Perhaps it is the jerry-built narrative that fails to support the material, or perhaps it is Brown's choice of examples that is strange. Humor, after all, is a very personal thing. What Brown finds meaningful and illustrative strikes me as idiosyncratic and random. Dee Brown's previous works display a wealth of insight into and knowledge about the West; *Wondrous Times* just does not.

*Banking in the American West: From the Gold Rush to Deregulation*, by Lynne Pierson Doti and Larry Schweikart. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991. ix, 357 pp. Tables, appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$38.50 cloth.

REVIEWED BY ERLING A. ERICKSON, UNIVERSITY OF THE PACIFIC

In this extensively researched book, Professors Doti and Schweikart have undertaken the formidable task of presenting an overview of banking in the West in the past 150 years. Their study aims not simply to recount the history of banks and bankers, but to connect the history of banking to the economic development of the region and to compare banking in the West to the rest of the nation. For purposes of their study, the authors define the West as "all states to the west of the Minnesota-Iowa-Missouri-Arkansas border" excluding Texas (5). For this reason, the only reference to Iowa banking is in the first chapter, in which the authors compare the early development of banking in Iowa to that in emerging states in the West. This study is based on research in archival material in a majority of the sixteen states covered

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